PRESBYTERY OF CHICAGO
CHURCH OFFICER DEVELOPMENT
"CALLED TO CARE"
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WORSHIP SERVICE

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Scripture
Isaiah 58:6-8
Matthew 25:31-46

You are our genius. | You are what makes us unique. | Your presence here today is a sign of great hope and strength for the Presbyterian branch of the Christian family.

Ecclesiastically ~~Statistically~~ we're not accustomed to thinking in terms of hope.

In fact it is almost obligatory at gatherings like this for speakers to scold us for evangelistic sloth and to issue dire predictions of our demise as a denomination in several decades if someone doesn't do something - and quickly!

I chose to be hopeful. | And my choice is not a naive whistling in the dark - or even a defiant call to ~~arms~~ as the great ship slips under the water. | My hope is based on a trust in the Lord of the church - which it says somewhere will withstand a lot - ~~the~~ powers of hell, and I conclude that compared to the power of hell this Presbyterian neurosis is small potatoes. | And I ground my hope in you. | You are here and

you don't have to be. You are here because you care about your church and you love the Lord of the Church. And you are a good reason to be very hopeful about the future.

That is not to say that God's Kingdom will come if we simply have enough Presbytery meetings or if we get enough of us to create a critical mass. In fact, if our own history teaches us anything it is that God will shape and mold us and make us into something new. We'll have to be brave and faithful and open.

You are our genius. Laity - the people of God - the ecclesia - all of us together.

God bless you as you pray and work and lead your congregations in the days ahead.

Leonard Bernstein was asked once to reflect on the process of writing music. He said:

> "I sit for long nights all by myself and don't have a thought in my head. I'm dry. I'm blocked, or so it seems. I sit at the piano and just improvise - strum some chords or try a sequence of notes. And then, suddenly, I find one that hits, that suggests something else. The whole point of composing, you see, is not to find one chord or one note you love. It is only when they progress to another chord or note that you have meaning...This is the most exciting moment that can happen in an artisti's life. .and everytime it happens...I am grateful for that gift." (cited by Matthew Fox, A Spirituality Named Compassion, p. 129)

"The whole point of composing is not to find one chord or one note you love. It is only when they progress to another chord or note that you have meaning..." That's the point of human life as well, I submit: to live and love and then to move out of self, beyond self, to connect with the totality of humanity, to know oneself not as an isolated drop of humanness, but as part of a vast, wonderful ocean. The point is to reach out, to make connections, to be wholly alive by being a part of the life all around you.

It is what Jesus Christ is about. God so loved the world...so cares about the individual human beings who live in the world, that He gave his only son, that whoever believes in that son...believes him to be the truth about human life, trusts him to be the saving truth about one's own life - that person will live a quality of life, a depth of life that can be described as eternal. That eternal life, that salvation, keeps looking in the Biblical idiom like life in relationship, life connected, life deepened and authenticated by love and carring for other life.

It's almost as if God has given us this magnificent gift of our lives, but we really can't have the gift, certainly can't enjoy the gift, until we learn to value and care about it passionately in others. God's various devices to save our souls seem to have as their first objective persuading us to forget about saving our own souls - or skins - and starting to care more about the souls and skins and bodies and spirits of others.

Fundamental to the whole enterprise is developing the capacity to care passionately about human life. And it is based on a very radical theological assertion: namely, that God cares that way about human life. The most extraordinary thing the Bible says about God happens early, at the beginning of the story of the Exodus when the Hebrew slaves are down in Egypt, suffering under their taskmasters, groaning in their oppression and God hears the groaning, and it affects God: it get's under God's skin and in God's heart, and some passion begins to occur and before you know it God is deeply involved in the revolutionary process of freeing his people. The God of the Bible isn't hidden away in the recesses of the universe, or amusing himself on Mt. Olympus. This God hears and sees and knows and responds to the condition of his people. This God is a God of compassion.

The God-life, the human life lived in relation to this ground of being then, is, similarly, compassionate. It is marked by caring, by hearing, seeing, knowing and responding to the condition of others. To live ethically in the Bible is to live compassionately.

The lesson of history which the world was taught again, as the wreaths were laid at Bitburg and Bergen-Belsen, and with the release of the Motion Picture, Shoah, is that not-caring is as dangerous and more common than unvarnished evil. The Holocaust was only possible in an atmosphere, not of total depravity, but moral neutrality. The world

must not forget that, and its clear lesson that on the complex issues of our time the only morally indefensible position is indifference...

Jesus gathered up the genius of the Judeo tradition and painted a memorable word picture near the end ~~of his own life~~ of his life that could not be more clear on this issue. It is the only detailed description of the last judgment in the New Testament. It is the apocalyptic bottom line according to Jesus. The sheep are at the King's right hand because they have fed the hungry, given drink to the thirsty, clothed the naked, welcomed the stranger and visited the prisoners. The goats don't make it. They have been guilty of no gross sin. They simply saw hunger, thirst, nakedness, loneliness, oppression, and turned their heads. They were probably too busy to do anything about it. They didn't care. Robert McAfee Brown, in a painfully honest exegesis of this passage, comments that "there are going to be a lot of goats," and then observes that, in this picture, at least, what counts is not what we thought...not praying, knowing the Apostles' Creed, regular church attendance, even confessing Jesus Christ as Lord. "They do not even rate a passing nod in Jesus' assessment. All that counts is helping those in need." (Unexpected News, p. 133)

The Vision

Our genius, I submit, is in identifying compassion as the life-giving component in the human conscience. What we have to tell the wrold about is a God of compassion and what we have to offer the world is a fullness of life lived compassionately.

What is it? Compassion is not adequately described as pity, or sympathy, or sentimentality. Rather it is a learned ability to identify with, feel with another human being. It is not to know intellectually about suffering of other people, it is to suffer because those people are suffering. Therefore, it is not always fun, nor cheerful, nor very pleasant. It is connected, directly, to passion: to the learned ability in ourselves, to care deeply and profoundly.

Our culture is suspicion of passion. Ever since the Greeks divided us in two, the Western world has been suspicious of the human heart, and has cast its lot with the brain. When in doubt, think - don't feel. That has served us well, mostly. But when it becomes our guiding principle, our summum bonum, we miss the glory of our humanity and the opportunity to live thoroughly in the world God has given us. Why, if people begin to live out of their hearts instead of their minds, they might make love and not war. They might even decide that protecting life; nurturing, celebrating, healing, and extending human life is at least as high a national priority as killing it.

Passion is suspect, and its extension - compassion - is regarded as weak, soft, naive. What a tragedy that in our gross misunderstanding, we have allowed Marxism to appear to the world as the ideology of compassion. What a tragedy that the more the dynamic happens in the Third World, the more determined we are not to cave in to it; not to be affected by the hunger, and injustice, and oppression that is always the fertile breeding ground for Marxist revolution.

Remember Kitty Genovese?

We discovered, 25 years ago, that we were forgetting how to care, and in a burst of altruism which was occasionally too ambitious perhaps, but always compassionate, we set off a small revolution in this country to eliminate institutional racism, to extend constitutional rights, and to end poverty. We lost the war on poverty and now - a quarter of a century later - we seem eager to blame the poor for their poverty, and the sick for their illnesses, and the illiterate for their ignorance - ~~telling~~. We seem to be moving away from, not closer to, the idea that compassion is a fundamental virtue, that we are responsible for one another.

Habits of the Heart, Robert Bellah's ~~new~~ book on rampant individualism in our country suggests that the move away from caring and compassion for others, into a self-contained narcissism, is destructive of the life and hope of our republic. It is reflected even in our religion, the authors contend. The most popular theologies focus almost entirely

That, I believe, is the source of discomfort w/ medic religion: it simply bases its appeal on the common ground of self interest: It promises to make you happy - fulfilled - saved... w/o the nuisance of involvement with anybody else

on the individual - in a way Jesus wouldn't recognize. The altar at which we bow, apparently, is self. Bellah's The book is based on a series of interviews and one which was included was Sheila Larson who said: "I believe in God. I'm not a religious fanatic. I can't remember the last time I went to church. My faith has carried me a long way. It's Sheilaism. Just my own little voice." [Christian Century, 5/15/85, p. 499-500]

Compassion begins with passion for life. It begins when we cut through the idolatry of individualism and allow ourselves to care profoundly about the lives of others and begin to discover that our own lives make sense in that exercise. But it will make you terribly vulnerable.

Matthew Fox, a Dominican priest and popular theologian, writes: "...it is a matter of our own will to survive. Each of us does build a wall around ourselves. If my brother bleeds, I bleed too. If he hurts, I hurt. I can't feed them all, or even very many. And so it's simply easier not to know, not to care." [op. cit., p. 3]

The overwhelming tragedy of famine in Africa has taught them to us... It is easier not to know -

The Gospel of Jesus Christ begins with an astounding assertion about the nature of God. It is that God cares about the human condition, and about your condition, and mine in particular. The Gospel offers good news about a creator who is compassionate: and a summons to live life in connection with other life; to live fully by caring deeply about and feeling the pain and joy, the suffering and the exaltation of other life.

In our time, supremely in the years ahead of us now, that Christian model looks like the world's salvation. Matthew Fox observes: "Now that the world is a global village we need compassion more than ever, not for altruism's sake,...or theology's sake, but for survival's sake." [op. cit., (i)] When all the popular vocalists got together and sang "We Are the World, We Are the Children," they were telling a new and important truth. And when they sang "we're saving our own lives... so let's start giving," they were rediscovering the model for life Jesus offered in Matthew 25.

In Jesus Christ, God has shown how much he cares for human life. In Christ, God ~~has summoned~~ Summons us to care, to live fully by caring profoundly about human life. In Christ, God has poured compassion into the human condition. The summons is to care enough to risk being hurt; to be open to the whole human family. The promise is God's blessing; God's precious gift of full life; ~~God's intimate and personal presence.~~

Jesus said: "As you did it to one of the least of these, my brothers - my sisters - you did it to me." Amen.

Come - Possess the Kingdom